

Georgia SHINES

A Model for Successful Implementation of a Statewide Child Welfare System

Until recently, child welfare case managers in Georgia relied on a confusing array of paper records and disparate, infrequently updated county databases as they evaluated more than 50,000 reports of child maltreatment each year. At times, information had to be mailed and faxed from county to county as workers addressed the needs of more than 13,000 children who are in the legal custody of the state's Department of Human Resources (DHR) Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). DFCS investigates child abuse, finds foster homes for abused and neglected children, and provides support services and programs to troubled families.

"They are trying to protect children with very limited resources and managing very difficult situations," says Georgia Chief Information Officer Patrick Moore, executive director of the Georgia Technology Authority. "They are balancing par-

ents, relatives, children's needs and lives in these cases. In order to do this, you have to have the right tools."

Since 2008, that tool has been Georgia SHINES, a Web-based automated child welfare information system developed by Accenture. SHINES allows the state's 3,700 case managers to manage, track and share information without repetitive paperwork and data entry. Based on a J2EE N-Tier platform, the system also allows case managers to access online case files and complete transactions whenever and wherever needed, allowing them to spend more time in the field meeting the needs of Georgia's most vulnerable citizens—its children.

"It's been a sea change in the way we do child welfare case management," says Venkat Krishnan, DHR's chief information officer.

The Georgia SHINES project is also notable for another reason: After two earlier attempts to build

a statewide case management system had proven unsuccessful, Accenture and DHR implemented SHINES in less than 20 months. The system went live in one county in suburban Atlanta in September 2007; nine



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months later it was fully implemented statewide. Both Accenture and state officials agree that the SHINES implementation is a model of how the proper combination of governance, personnel and vendors can successfully implement a statewide mission-critical system.

From The Top Down

Support for the program came straight from the top, as Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue made SHINES one of his highest priorities. “The governor came into office with a deep passion for the welfare of children and saw that this part of DHR needed help,” says Moore. “The state had a bad history of trying to upgrade these systems, and the governor said, ‘We will get this done during my term—period.’”

DHR Commissioner B.J. Walker took a key leadership role in the implementation and was actively involved throughout the process. “She did an incredible job making sure it was on everyone’s front burner,” Moore says.

For Walker, SHINES represented a way to “give our case managers the tools they need to ensure the welfare of Georgia’s children and the transparency needed for accountability,” she says. Walker hired Krishnan to

manage the project for DHR. Now the agency’s CIO, Krishnan came from the private sector where he had managed similar projects. “You have to have a project manager on the state side who understands how projects of this scope operate,” says Sean Toole, Accenture’s project manager for SHINES. “Inexperience on a big project is a real killer.”

DHR then built a project team that included the department’s “best and brightest” IT staff, as well as representatives from other state agencies, Accenture, and an independent verification and validation (IV&V) partner. The team, which grew to almost 100 people, was co-located in one space—which Krishnan considered critical to maintaining a robust communication protocol. The team quickly learned to look at the project “as not about Accenture



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or the state, but very holistically,” Krishnan says.

Krishnan ran the SHINES implementation like a private-sector cost center, implementing tight cost controls to ensure it would come in under budget. The project-management team met weekly to hash out “every issue or risk that was potentially out there,” he says. “We had the trust and loyalty that we built over the first few months so we could speak freely even though we were from different organizations.”

DHR also followed basic but critical project-management principles—developing a schedule to manage to, keeping on top of potential risks and keeping senior leaders apprised of potential problems as needed. The team developed a comprehensive project plan outlining the responsibilities of all involved. “When you have a multiyear project, you have to have a clear roadmap,” Krishnan says. “Even though it was cumbersome at times, any deviation from the plan could be quickly spotted and talked about in detail in our weekly project management meetings.”

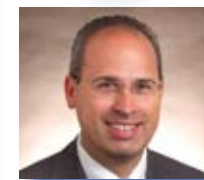
During the design phase, DHR brought in end users from the field, including case managers, supervisors and county directors, to help shape the application. “That was a big commitment on their part,” says Colleen Mousinho,

DFCS SHINES project manager. And all parties continually reinforced the importance of maintaining the speed of the rollout. “The bias was always towards the schedule,” Toole says. “They had the mindset and clarity to meet the goal and objectives.”

A New Model for Governance

Georgia also developed a lean governance model during the SHINES rollout that kept the highest levels of state government apprised of the project’s ongoing implementation.

The project was overseen by the state’s newly created Critical Project Review Panel, which met monthly with SHINES project managers to discuss and resolve issues as they arose. Chaired by Georgia Chief Operating Officer Jim Lientz and staffed by the state’s top executive officers, the panel “removed roadblocks,” Toole says. “Having that level of audience aware of the details of the project prevented things



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from being pushed to the side.”

At the same time, communication at the highest levels of state government allowed the governor’s office to make decisions about other policy issues affecting DHR with the SHINES rollout in mind. “They personally came to meetings,” says Mousinho.



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“They clearly had a commitment to get this project done.”

From the state perspective, the panel “ensured that everybody knows the project was being watched at the executive level,” says Moore. “They know their reputation is on the line and they’re being held to account.”

Training and Rollout

Preparing nearly 4,000 users across the state to use the system was the next challenge. Training schedules were created far in advance, and face-to-face training was augmented with robust Web-based training and online help functionality built into the system. A year and a half before SHINES was up and running, DHR identified employees in

security; the team deployed staff to the areas where the need was greatest.

Training proved critical, as SHINES reflected a significant change in mindset and culture as well as technology. Case managers had used the state’s legacy tracking systems to compile information for periodic review, and many relied on data-entry operators and transcription services to update data. To have accurate online case records, SHINES required case managers to update information in real time, as well as to handle invoicing and financial management components that had previously been the responsibility of a central finance unit. As a result, the project team “did quite a few road trips to talk about how critical it is to have a comprehensive case management system and how it helps in the long haul,” Krishnan says. For example, a case manager working with a rural child with special needs can use SHINES to find highly specialized resources elsewhere in the state and to make arrangements for services. In such cases, SHINES “helps case managers make a better decision on the right fit for the child,” Krishnan says.

“The biggest thing,” says Mousinho, “is helping the staff understand the outcomes, tying

every county who helped promote SHINES by communicating with coworkers and planning training sessions. As the rollout drew nearer, Accenture began a readiness assessment process, evaluating every county on nearly 25 criteria ranging from workload levels and training status to

it back to the system and how it can support them as they work to achieve those outcomes.”

The SHINES Legacy

With mobile access built into SHINES’ scalable, Web-based framework, Georgia now has what may be the nation’s most advanced child welfare case management system. “But that’s not what made it successful,” Krishnan says. “We don’t talk about the technology.” Instead, “it was the people factor,” Mousinho says. “They understood the business need and did the work.”

On the state level, the SHINES experience is already helping guide future large-scale projects. SHINES was the first major project to go through the Critical Project Review Panel and it was “one of the biggest successes we’ve seen so far,” Moore says. Now all projects above a certain spending level follow the same process, and “we’re really starting to see the benefit of having the visibility because the maturity of the project management process has improved in the state,” Moore says. ■

LESSONS LEARNED:

Get buy-in from the top. Successful IT projects are rarely political hot buttons, but Governor Sonny Perdue made SHINES one of his priorities—and now counts it as one of his achievements. Along with communicating the importance of the project, Perdue’s executive-level staff also remained involved throughout its implementation and ensured that agency heads maintained the same focus. “Executive involvement is absolutely critical for large technology projects,” Moore says.

Involve the right people. Project managers with both DHR and Accenture had experience with past projects of similar scope. Krishnan’s private-sector experience before joining the state agency ensured that DHR would have the ability to manage both project deadlines and outside vendors. “State government does not have a well-defined competency in managing vendors,” Moore says. “The mindset you often see is that once you’ve signed the contract, vendors are supposed to go off and do the work and everything else is just supposed to take care of itself.”

DHR also identified a strong team of IT specialists and vendors, who brought their own experienced personnel to the table. Toole, Accenture’s project manager for SHINES, has been involved in child welfare projects for 18 years.

Follow proven project-management principles. DHR leaders stressed the value of sticking to such basics as managing to a schedule, tracking potential risks and regularly updating all stakeholders.

Transparency is critical. Both within DHR and among its state and federal partners, a key challenge was “overcoming the impression left from the previous attempts that we couldn’t do this,” Mousinho says. “We did that by making sure we were transparent about what we were doing, and by making sure we met deadlines as promised.” Doing so required creating a sense of urgency and learning “not to be afraid to speak about big issues and challenges for a complex project,” Krishnan says. “That’s something we did well as a team.”

Governance matters. State officials struck a critical balance by finding the right structure to oversee the project—their Critical Project Review Panel. “By keeping lean but very senior governance, linked up with the state’s CIO, we could get decisions made immediately,” says Toole. Moore agrees. “When issues came up, the right level of attention was brought to bear on them.”

Choose the right vendors. Moore stresses the importance of seeking not the lowest bid, but “the best-value bid. Failed projects cost the state, and typically result from getting the cheapest person to do the job.”

Involve end users. Along with including case managers and other division staffers in the project’s design phase, DHR “made sure the project was visible and present” by communicating constantly with stakeholders, Mousinho says. Along with identifying local employees to serve as point people, the project’s implementation team sent out regular e-mails and newsletters updating the project’s status—and even composed a song extolling the system’s benefits.